

Parshas Beshalach

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1. Maintaining the Balance

The Torah states, **“V’yhe beshalach Pharaoh es ha’aam ...It happened when Pharaoh sent out the people ...”** The Midrash Tanchuma explains that the term *“beshalach* - sent out” indicates that Pharaoh not only allowed the Jewish people to leave Egypt, but he actually escorted them out of Egypt. As the Torah states regarding Avraham escorting the angels after hosting them, **“V’Avraham holeich emam l’shalcham – Avraham walked with them to escort them...”** The Midrash continues, “The mouth (of Pharaoh) that had initially said, ‘I shall not send them out’ was now saying ‘I will send them out.’” What was the reward for doing this? The Jewish people were Commanded: You shall not mistreat the Egyptian. In addition, the mouth (of Pharaoh) that initially had said, **“I do not know Hashem”** later stated after the plague of Hail, **‘...Hashem is the Righteous One, and I and my people are the evil...’** What was the reward for stating this? The Egyptian people merited being buried (after the closing of the Sea). As the Torah states, **‘You extended your right hand and they (the Egyptians) were swallowed up by the earth...’**

It is difficult to understand why Pharaoh merited reward for what he had done or stated. The Plague of Hail was unique even as a revealed miracle because it was a demonstration of two counter-forces coexisting – the fire was not extinguished by the water. This reality was a confirmation that G’d is not a “deity,” as the Egyptians had believed, but rather, He is the Omnipotent Being who transcends and defies the laws of nature. The Hand of G’d could not be denied. So if Pharaoh’s statement was only recognition of the obvious – that G’d was the Omnipotent Being – then why should he merit reward? Previously, Pharaoh had only denied the existence of G’d because he attributed the plagues to natural forces. However, regarding the plague of Hail, he could not dismiss G’d as a force acting within nature. Seemingly, he had no choice but to acknowledge G’d.

The Torah tells us that the night before the Splitting of the Sea, Moshe was told to extend his hand over the Sea. Subsequently “a strong easterly wind” began and blew the entire night. On the following morning, the Sea split. If in fact the Splitting of the Sea came about through G’d’s Willing it to split, then why was it necessary to have a prelude to the splitting of the sea – the strong easterly wind.

The Torah tells us that there is a Positive Commandment that firewood should be added to the altar (mizbeyach) on a continuous basis. There is also a Negative Commandment that states, “You shall not extinguish that fire (the fire on the altar).” The Chinuch explains that there was a heavenly fire, which continuously burned on the altar. Because of its spiritual nature, it was not possible to extinguish this heavenly fire. However, there needed to be a human/man-made fire continuously burning on the altar in order to conceal the heavenly fire. If the human fire were to be extinguished, then one would recognize and see the heavenly fire. Witnessing such a revealed miracle/ the Hand of G’d, would detract from one’s free choice. Thus, the spiritual fire should be concealed.

The Chinuch concludes that even when G’d brings about a revealed miracle, He always creates a setting that could be interpreted and seen as something other than Divine. The example offered by the Chinuch is the prelude to the Splitting of the Sea, which was a strong easterly wind that blew the entire night. The fierce easterly wind was completely unrelated to the miracle that was to follow; however, in order to give man the ability to reject (and not be forced to see the Hand of G’d) that prelude was necessary. With the principle of the Chinuch, we are able to understand the Midrash Tanchuma.

One would think that because of the dimension of miracle which came about through the

tenth plague - the killing of the first born - that Pharaoh was “forced” to recognize the Hand of Hashem. However, this is not the case as the Chinuch had stated. In the context of every miracle, there is always a way to process it irrationally and deny the Hand of G’d. Pharaoh’s correct understanding of the tenth plague is demonstrated through his appreciation of the value of the Jewish People. He escorted them out of Egypt as a sign of respect. Because Pharaoh, the world renowned monarch, openly denied the existence of G’d, his acknowledgement of Him as the Omnipotent One was a Kiddush Hashem (Sanctification of G’d’s Name). It was because of this positive result that he deserved reward.

Often in life we are presented with situations that cannot be regarded as anything other than Hand of Hashem; yet we choose to see it differently. It is only because of our own conflicts of interest that we choose to see it as such. Although G’d’s Intervention or Presence may be obvious, it is not to the degree that would impinge on our free choice; thus, allowing us to reject G’d’s involvement.

2. The Value of Commitment

The Torah states that after Pharaoh realized that the Jewish people were not returning to Egypt, **“He (Pharaoh) harnessed his own chariot and took his people with him.”** Pharaoh and his legions pursued the Jewish people into the Sea. The Splitting of the Sea was the most spectacular and awesome of all of the miracles that had ever taken place in existence. The Torah tells us that without any hesitation, Pharaoh and his people pursued the Jews into the Sea. They were not in any way affected, deterred, or even impressed with this unique supernatural phenomenon. Chazal tell us that at the time of the Splitting of the Sea, the lowly maidservant had witnessed a level of revelation of G’d’s Presence that was not seen by Yechezkel the Prophet. How is it possible that Pharaoh and his people not be affected by this spectacular event? How could they not be taken aback – even to hesitate for one moment – by the awesomeness of the Splitting of the Sea? They were undeterred even though they had already experienced the tenth Plague – the Killing of the First Born. At that time Pharaoh and his people had come to a new level of appreciation after they witnessed the Hand of G’d. The Jewish people were seen as a special people. The Midrash tells us that because of this new level of understanding, Pharaoh had escorted the Jewish people out of Egypt.

The Gemara in Tractate Sukkah states, “I (G’d) created the evil inclination. I created Torah as its antidote.” The evil inclination of man is a natural part of his make-up; however, G’d gave us the Torah to enable us to contend with our inclination. As King Solomon states in Mishlei (Proverbs), *“Neir mitzvah v’Torah ohr* – the mitzvah is fuel and the Torah is the light/illuminator.” Through the study of Torah, one gains clarity and thus is not distracted by his evil inclination. Without Divine Assistance it is not possible to achieve the clarity that is necessary to go beyond one’s conflict of interest to appreciate the value of spirituality.

It is stated in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers) that if one is engaged in Torah study and pauses to take note of the beauty of nature, “How beautiful is that tree!” one is liable to be put to death. Why is observing the beauty of G’d’s world in this context punishable by death? If one truly appreciates and understands the preciousness of Torah, one would not remove himself from it to observe the beauty of nature. It is only because one does not appreciate and relate to the true value of Torah will one be distracted. This is the basis for his culpability. We pray to G’d that He

should give us the capacity to appreciate the value of our spirituality to pursue the study of Torah. Anything outside of the spiritual realm has no intrinsic value or importance unless it is medium for our spiritual advancement. If one were given the clarity to truly appreciate the value of the spiritual, every moment would be viewed as one of infinite opportunity – not to be wasted by any distraction.

Pharaoh was singularly focused on the loss of slave force - the Jewish people. He had understood that they deceived him. If he did not retake control over them, the loss would be catastrophic. In addition, the Jews had taken the personal wealth of the Egyptian people before they departed - leaving the Egyptians semi-impoverished. Because Pharaoh's only concern was to regain his loss, nothing else mattered to him. He did not focus even on something as awesome as the Splitting of the Sea.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos states, "Rebbe Tarfon says, 'The day is short and there is much work to do. The workers are lazy and the reward for completing the work is enormous and the Employer (G'd) is demanding.'" Rebbe Tarfon is teaching us that one's life, despite appearing to be lengthy, is relatively short. There is infinite spiritual opportunity in every moment of our existence; but because we are lazy we do not appreciate the value of the moment to pursue eternal reward. Hashem, our Creator (the Employer) is anxious for us to engage in our purpose – the development of our spirituality, to reap the ultimate benefit. If one would truly appreciate Rebbe Tarfon's words, there would be nothing that could distract him. It is only through the study of Torah that one is able to gain a semblance of appreciation for the infinite value of the Torah and its mitzvos. Consequently one would not be distracted.

The text of the blessing of the study of Torah states, "Blessed are You, Hashem...and has commanded us to engage in the words of Torah..." Chofetz Chaim z'tl explains that the reason the men of the High Assembly chose the text "to engage" rather than "to study the Torah" (which would seem more appropriate) was because the term "engage" is the same term used when one is involved in a business pursuit. Just as when one engages in a pursuit for monetary gain, he is fully focused and can not be distracted, identically one's immersion in the study of Torah must be similar. It is understood that to have any relevance to this level of dedication, one must make his Torah study primary and his work secondary. This is not a priority that is quantified by time allocation but rather through one's focus and understanding what is the means and what is the end.

3. The Importance of Reflecting on Life's Experiences

The Torah states, "**Moshe stretched out his hand over the Sea... and Hashem churned Egypt in the midst of the Sea. The water came back and covered the chariots and the horseman of the entire army of Pharaoh...there remained not one of them...The Children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the Sea; the water was a wall (*choma*) for them, on their right and on their left.**"

Chazal tell us that the word "*choma-wall*," which refers to the water of the Sea surrounding the Jewish people is written with the letter "vav" deleted. Thus, the word can be read

as “*chaima*- wrath.” The Midrash tells us that as the Jewish people walked through the Sea, surrounded on each side by walls of water, the angels began prosecuting them before Hashem. The angels said to G’d, “Why are you sparing the Jewish people and destroying the Egyptians? These are idolaters and these are idolaters.” The angels were saying, since the Jewish people were idolaters no less than the Egyptians, why were the Egyptians more culpable? The Jewish people should be destroyed as well as the Egyptians. Hashem responded and thus quelled the prosecution. Therefore the Jewish people were able to survive the event unscathed.

As a result of surviving the Splitting of the Sea and witnessing the destruction of the Egyptian armies, the Torah states, “**Israel saw the great Hand that Hashem inflicted upon Egypt; and the people revered Hashem, and they had faith in Hashem and in Moshe, His servant.**” Ramban in his commentary explains that the Jewish people at this moment ascended to a level of faith that was unequalled in any time in history with the exception of the Sinai event.

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that the greatest level of prosecution comes upon a person when he is in a state of danger. It is only when the individual needs an exceptional and out of the ordinary level of Mercy does satan prosecute. This is because when a person needs to be accommodated on a special level, one requires a greater degree of worthiness. Thus, he is open for prosecution, which determines if his spiritual record allows for special treatment.

Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk z’tl asks how come “The Jewish people were exposed, prior to the Splitting of the Sea, to many events that were life-threatening (such as the Ten Plagues) and the angels did not prosecute. They did not say at that time – These are idolaters and these are idolaters. Why are the Egyptians more culpable than the Jews?” Why were the Jews protected from prosecution prior to the Splitting of the Sea? Reb Meir Simcha z’tl answers that until the Jewish people entered into the Sea they were unified at an exceptional level. Therefore they were protected from prosecution. However, the Midrash tells us that when they entered into the sea they became fractionalized because they divided into twelve groups – each one taking another path through the Sea. Each Tribe believed that their pedigree was better than that of his fellow. It was because of this lack of unity that the Jewish people were vulnerable to prosecution at the Sea. However it is possible to answer Reb Meir Simcha’s question differently.

As explained in the Gemara in Tractate Shabbos, when one finds himself experiencing a life-threatening situation he is subject to prosecution and requires an enormous degree of Rachamim (Mercy). As they walked through the Sea, the Jewish people were continuously in a state of danger. They were experiencing a miracle every moment that the walls of water did not come crashing down upon them. However, while in Egypt, they lived separately from the Egyptian community. Thus, one could say that because they were not exposed to the Plagues, they were not in need of the unusual level of Rachamim. The Plagues could have spread to the Jewish area but this was not the Will of G’d. However in the Sea, the Jew was in the same context of danger as the Egyptian.

When the Jewish people crossed to safety and witnessed the destruction of the Egyptians they had “**...faith in Hashem and in Moshe, His servant.**” This level of faith was attained because the Jewish people understood that they were the direct beneficiaries of Hashem’s Mercy – despite their own lack of worthiness. They understood that although they were idolaters in Egypt (as the Egyptians were), and seemingly undeserving of this level of Mercy; nevertheless, they

were spared by Hashem because of His love for them.

Chazal tell us, “*Yom Kippur is K’Purim* - Yom Kippur is like Purim.” In Hebrew the letter “kof” denotes similarity. Seemingly, the words of Chazal are difficult. The holiday of Purim and the day of Yom Kippur are diametrically opposite. On Purim one must indulge in feasting and drinking, while, conversely, on Yom Kippur one is completely detached from physicality. The basic necessities of the human being are denied to him on Yom Kippur (the five areas of affliction). Yom Kippur is the most somber and spiritual holiday of the year – a day of atonement and purity. Nevertheless Chazal tell us that there is a commonality between these two holidays. How do we understand this?

On Purim, we celebrate our physical existence. Haman had decreed that every Jewish man, woman, and child should be annihilated. Haman was the viceroy of the Persian Empire. Achashverosh, the king of Persia ruled the world supreme. As it is stated in the Megillah, “His kingdom spanned the world from India to Ethiopia – one hundred and twenty seven countries. After the decree of Haman against the Jewish people was issued, the Jew had nowhere to flee.

The reason G’d allowed this to take place was because the Jewish people had neglected the Torah and adherence to its principles. At the last moment, through Queen Esther, the decree was miraculously rescinded and overturned- allowing the Jew to destroy his enemy. After experiencing this miracle, the Jewish people throughout the world re-affirmed their acceptance of Torah with love, which was qualitatively a greater level of acceptance than at Sinai. At Sinai, the Jewish people were compelled to accept the Torah out of fear of destruction. G’d held the mountain over their head and told them, “Either accept the Torah or there you will be buried.”

Maharal of Prague z’tl in his work concerning the Megillah of Esther explains that the reason the Jewish people reaffirmed their acceptance of Torah out of love on Purim was because they came to a level of understanding of G’d’s unceasing love for them. They could not have been spared at the last moment without G’d’s intervention. Because the Jewish people realized to what degree Hashem loved them, they accepted the Torah out of love. Now we are able to understand the commonality between Yom Kippur and Purim.

On Yom Kippur- the Day of Atonement, when one is totally divorced from the material realm and is focused on introspection and repentance to achieve forgiveness, the Jew attains a level of clarity to understand the importance of his relationship to G’d. Yom Kippur is a day that allows the Jew, regardless of his past, to atone and be spiritually cleansed. Thus, Yom Kippur is a day that the Jew understands that he is loved and valued by G’d.

We learn from this that whenever the Jew is in a precarious or life-threatening situation and is miraculously spared, he is able to come to a new level of understanding and appreciation of G’d’s love for him. Thus, at the Splitting of the Sea, the Jewish people “**had faith in Hashem and in Moshe, His servant.**” They understood that despite the prosecution against them (that they were no different than the Egyptians) Hashem saved them. The objective of the experience of the Sea was to bring the Jewish people to a more advanced level of faith by demonstrating to them their special value to G’d.

Often in life we do not appreciate and recognize that we are beneficiaries of G'd's Kindness and Mercy. However, if one reflects on these matters one can come to a more profound level of spirituality because he understands G'd's love for the Jew.

4. The Root of All Difficulty

The Torah tells us that G'd commanded Moshe to tell the Jewish people to travel back towards the Egyptians who were pursuing them. As a result of this behavior, the Egyptians would believe that the Jews were confused and trapped in the desert. The value of this perception will be **"I (Hashem) shall harden the heart of Pharaoh and he will pursue them, and I will be glorified through Pharaoh and his entire army, and Egypt will know that I am Hashem."** Rashi cites Chazal who explain **"I will be glorified through Pharaoh"** to mean that **"When Hashem avenges His Honor through the destruction of the evil people, His Name becomes great and glorified."**

After the Plague of Hail had ceased, the Torah states, **"Pharaoh saw that the hail had ceased, and he continued to sin; and he made his heart stubborn (*va' yachbeid*)..."** It is interesting to note that the term used to express the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in this context is **"kaveid (stubborn)."** The letters of **"kaveid"** are **"kof, bais, daled"** which are the same letters as **"kavod (glory/honor)."** What is the significance of this similarity?

At the beginning of the Portion of Bo the Torah states, **"Moshe and Aaron came to Pharaoh and said to him, 'So said Hashem, G'd of the Hebrews, Until when will you refuse to humble (*lei'aanos*) yourself before Me?'"** Rashi cites Targum who explains **"lei'aanos – to humble"** to mean **"to subordinate."** Rashi also explains that the word **"lei'aanos"** is derived from the word **"aanee – impoverished."** An impoverished person has no reason to pride himself and be haughty. He is thus humble because of his impoverished state. Moshe thus said to Pharaoh – **"...until when will you refuse to humble (*lei'aanos*) yourself before G'd because you have no basis to be haughty and stubborn."** The root of Pharaoh's obstinacy (*kaveid*) was his own glory/honor (*kavod*). Because of his ego, Pharaoh did not want to admit to himself that he was in fact the subject of the Omnipotent G'd – despite the fact that literally moments earlier (during the Plague of Hail) he had said, **"...Hashem is the Righteous One and I and my people are evil..."** Pharaoh could not admit to himself that it was obvious that he had been defeated and subordinated by G'd because of his *kavod* – glory/honor (ego).

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that before the Sanhedrin (the High Court of Israel) would begin interrogating witnesses who were meant to testify in a capital case (in which the defendant's life was at stake), they would attempt to communicate to the witnesses the value of human life. In order to relate to them the value and dimension of importance of a human being, the Sanhedrin would say, **"Why was Adam (man) initially created as a single being, while all of the other species were created with a counterpart/mate? So that a person should say, 'For my sake the world in its entirety was created.'"** This statement can be processed in one of two ways- one that is correct and the other incorrect. The correct understanding of this reality is that G'd created this relatively unlimited world for the sake of a single individual to indicate that the potential and

objective of man's existence is unlimited. Therefore, every moment must be invested properly. This understanding of man's awesome purpose is humbling.

However, the incorrect understanding of this reality, "For my sake the world in its entirety was created" is that G'd created this vast universe only to accommodate my own needs and desires. This causes man to be self-absorbed and consumed with his own glory. Rather than humbling the person, this perspective causes him to be arrogant and insolent. Thus, it is one's ego/"kavod- glory" which causes him to become "kaveid -stubborn"- and not open to see it differently. With this understanding we can explain the meaning of **"...I will be glorified (e'kavada) through Pharaoh and his entire army, and Egypt will know that I am Hashem."**

It is through the destruction of the most powerful force – the Egyptian army, that the world will understand that Pharaoh's glory was only granted to him by G'd. He was only coronated to be the king of Egypt because G'd Willed it so. Thus, Pharaoh's glory will be understood to belong to G-d and not to Pharaoh.

If one has difficulty understanding or accepting fundamental Torah principles (or concepts and beliefs communicated in the Talmud), one must realize and acknowledge that the basis for his resistance stems from his ego. He is being difficult and intransigent in his position only because of his "kavod - glory." It is due to his own perspective of life - what he believes to be correct or incorrect. The only way one could truly have relevance to achieving his spiritual potential - glorifying G-d - is to understand that whatever he may be and whatever he may have been endowed with is due to G'd's beneficence.

5. What is the Basis for One's Classification? *(from Parshas Bo)*

The Torah states in preparation for the onset of the tenth plague – the killing of the firstborn of Egypt, **"...touch the lintel and the two doorposts with some of the blood that is in the basin, and as for you, you shall not leave the entrance of the house until morning. Hashem will pass through to smite Egypt and He will see the blood that is on the lintel and the two doorposts; and Hashem will pass over the entrance and He will not permit the destroyer to enter your homes to smite..."** G'd told the Jewish people to place the blood from the Pascal lamb on their lintels and doorposts so that the "destroyer/angel of death" shall not enter the home of the Jew. He also commanded the Jewish people not to leave the protection of their homes. Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the Jewish people were commanded to remain in their homes because when the "angel of death" is given permission to act, he does not differentiate between the rasha (evil) and the tzaddik (righteous). Thus, the angel of death would kill both the Jew and the Egyptian.

It is stated in Koheles (Ecclesiastes), "There is no tzaddik (righteous person) in the land who does good and does not sin." Meaning, there is no perfect tzaddik; yet, he is not prosecuted and punished for his spiritual failing because of G-d's Midas HaRachamim (Attribute of Mercy). The rasha, despite the fact that he is seriously spiritually flawed and culpable for his advanced level of evil, is able to continue (and even succeed) because of G'd's Attribute of Mercy.

However, when Hashem chooses to punish the rasha, He suspends the Attribute of Mercy and allows him to be prosecuted; thus he is subjected to the Attribute of Justice. In this context of complete and exacting Justice no spiritual defect can be tolerated – even the tzaddik, who has minor infractions, will be held culpable. No one is able to survive that level of unmitigated Judgment. Thus, at the onset of the tenth plague, if the Jew were to leave the protection of his home, he would have placed himself within the same context of judgment as the people of Egypt. There would be no differentiation between the tzaddik and the rasha.

Although the Jew was an idolater in Egypt, his immediate location was not subject to that level of intense scrutiny because of the merit of the Pascal lamb. The slaughtering of the Pascal lamb was a rejection of the Egyptian belief and was an open declaration of disassociation from the values and beliefs of the Egyptian society at large.

The Jew throughout history, who lived his life in total conformance with the Torah, was and is protected through the Midas HaRachamim (Attribute of Mercy), despite the predicament of the gentile community. Although the Jew physically lives in their world, he does not identify with their values and aspirations. Thus, the Jew merits the exclusive protection of G'd. However, if one identifies himself as a member of their community, and does not share the moral and ethical values of the Torah, he will be subject to the same level of prosecution that will befall that community. The Jewish people in Egypt were protected because they were willing to separate themselves from the Egyptian community – and adhere to Hashem's Dictate – despite the risk to their lives.

Rambam in Hilchos Deos states, "As man was created, he is naturally drawn to be influenced by his community and the people who surround him. Thus, one should attach himself to tzaddikim (righteous) and associate with chachamim (Torah Sages) to learn from their ways. He should distance himself from the evil doers, who walk in the dark, so that he will not be influenced by their ways. As King Solomon states, 'The one who walks with chachamim will become wise and the one who shepherds fools will become evil.' This is also true when one lives in a community that is immoral or corrupt, where the people do not walk a straight path - one should leave that community and go to the tzaddikim. If there is no community that is suitable and adheres to the principles of Torah, then one should remain separate even if it means living in a cave or going out into the desert."

In addition to the concerns which are raised by Rambam in regard being associated with evil doers, there is another reason a Jew should distance himself from these types of people and communities. It is only when one does not identify with them and is not part of them that he will merit the protection of the Attribute of Mercy – despite the predicament of the community. However if one chooses to engage with and assume the posture of the world at large, although it may be debase and immoral, he will be classified as part of that community and be subject to their level of Judgment.